

Fall 2000

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Valparaiso University

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# the lighter

fall 2000







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valparaiso university's  
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All submissions remain anonymous through the selection process.

The Lighter welcomes submissions from all undergraduate, graduate, and law students of Valparaiso University, regardless of race, gender, religious creed, or sexual orientation.

The editor assumes responsibility for the contents of this magazine. The views expressed in these works do not represent any official stance of Valparaiso University.

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## Acknowledgements

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<b>Cindy Zuniga</b>	back cover	Corazón Encerrado

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Jessica C. Pleuss  
Solace in the City - Shanghai, China



Adam Heet



Jamie Brand  
Blank Page

When I can live without writing it down  
or dream--just once--and forget,  
    then. then beauty may grow mature  
    not swallowed or owned but left.  
then. then I may let run  
my protein quota and leave  
my medicine on the counter;  
leaning back, fasting  
    simply  
I wish           to move, cleanly cut,  
into ink free from verse  
and again virgin kisses of God.



hour 7: my obsession with flight has risen to new heights  
or my obsession with anonymity, as it sometimes seems  
sleeping above new worlds oblivious to my existence  
I am nameless, England's curving shore glitters back at me  
Unaware and distant, a golden chain adrift on black velvet.

Reflections on the Red-Eye to Amsterdam

**K**elley Johnson

John Gresley III



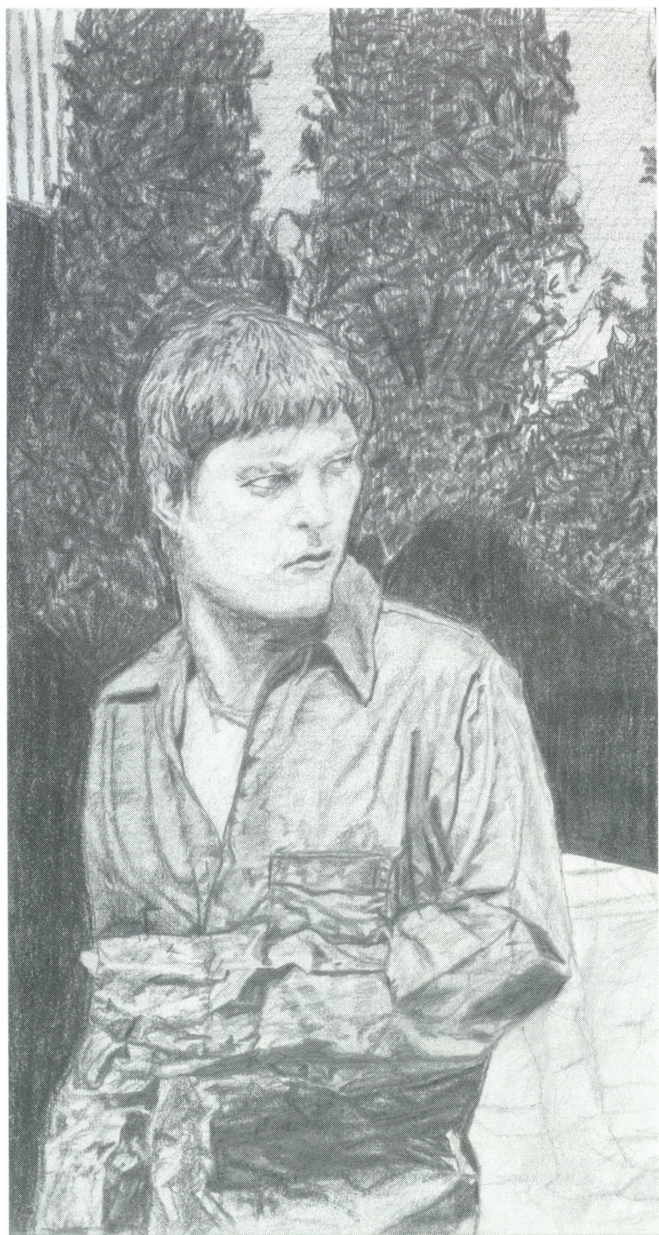
The Amsterdam Experience

Lisa Farver  
Soundtrack

I cranked up Ani Difranco  
on my car stereo,  
rolled down the windows  
and stuck out my hand,  
fanning it into the wind  
Trying to catch something  
hurling by in midflight,  
Tumbling down the tunnel of road  
laid out before me...  
Then back into half-light,  
letting raindrops fly in  
and slap me on the face.  
I sang,  
and looked straight ahead  
thinking I'll miss something good  
if I blink  
or sneeze  
or turn my head  
to see you-  
dead-  
in the passenger seat,  
rolling up the windows,  
turning up the heat  
and turning down the volume  
on the soundtrack to my life.



Fresh #2 **D**irk van der Duim



Annie Kuenster



Erin Creed

Elegy for the living  
(for my grandfather)

Soft manicured hands  
poke the perfect shiny pink pill  
through wrinkled blue lips  
past clammy gums long since relieved of their ivory  
burdens.

Unsteady fingers guide the razor  
(electric of course)  
across ever-deepening caves in the  
hilly, stubbly terrain of a face  
so dear  
to me.

Gaudy ring weighs down the gray finger:  
a millstone round the neck of the  
proverbial sinner.

Still I remember the way it was~  
plaid pants, striped tie;  
soft hands  
the day I was baptized.

Shannon Kruse  
Summer Family

We laze about on our couch  
that sits in the living room of our house  
that nestles between houses just like ours  
in a neighborhood full of our houses.

One of us is good, one of us is bad,  
One of us tries to forget what was had  
two weeks ago on that road.  
One of us is hard to trust.

Not one of us is happy, not one of us is glad,  
Not one of us is dealing with the task at hand.  
And he won't sit behind the wheel  
and we won't bring it up.

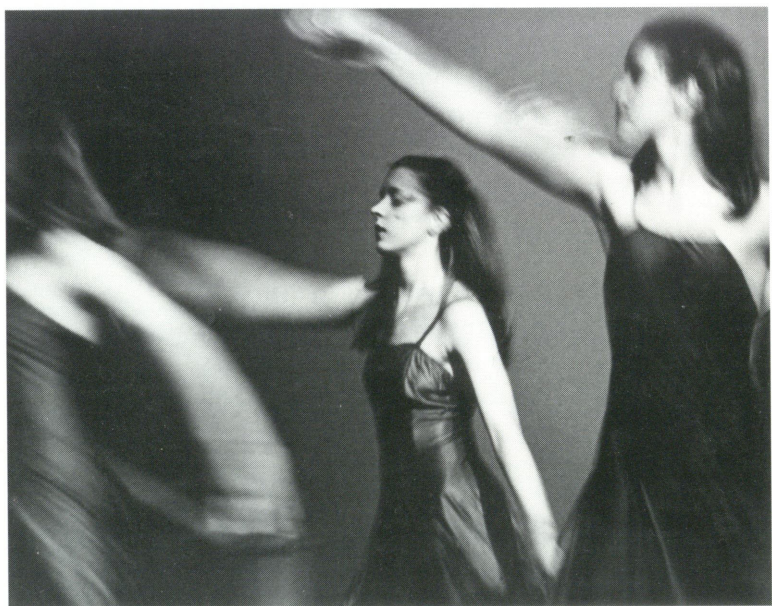
Each of us is edgy, each of us is tense,  
Each of us is staring at my white picket fence.  
With our plastered on smiles,  
We ignore unwelcome thoughts.

But we laze about on our couch  
that sits in the living room of our house  
We are nestled between selves just like ours  
in a neighborhood full of our selves.

Creamer **D**irk van der Duim







Mike Kneeland

the spider's shell surveys my work  
from her incandescent tomb  
funny how the light which  
saw eight legs dance their last  
aids me now in my attempt  
to bring these bare walls to life

and us-  
with a stiff roller in my hand  
can I paint over our mistakes?  
can I mask your hard-edged sadness  
with a dusty shade of red?

when my body aches  
from the work of you  
I come back to the o-ring  
in the center of it all  
turning, my senses renewed

to the scent of my labors  
running freely down my face  
fresh and young and wet to the world  
what we once were  
was it not to be?

perhaps I could become  
my childhood fantasy  
and leave these tasks behind  
you always said I could make it

and yet  
I rather like the way this leaves me  
like the backyard sunshine  
leaves me salted and glistening  
as I lie on my back

like the she-spider  
I too survey my task's completion  
and see that it is good

to be rid of you is worth the work.

Aaron Miller  
Always Room?

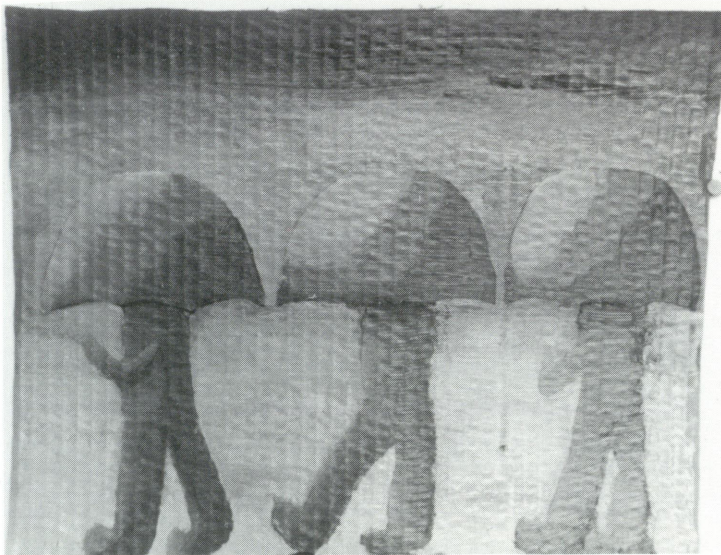
There's something so tempting about darkness  
Like sweet, dark, jello  
Standing there, jiggling  
Just out of reach of my fingertips

It calls to me "taste me!" - "you want meso much!"  
And it is right. I do want to try it.  
To taste what Bill Cosby would never endorse  
To feel it slowly dissolving in my senses

But even so I realize that common sense will win-  
That I will most likely leave it there,  
Jiggling alone, sadly.  
Because there isn't always room for jello.



Cindy Zuniga



Elephant Walk **K**endra Morgan

Lisa Farver  
I fell

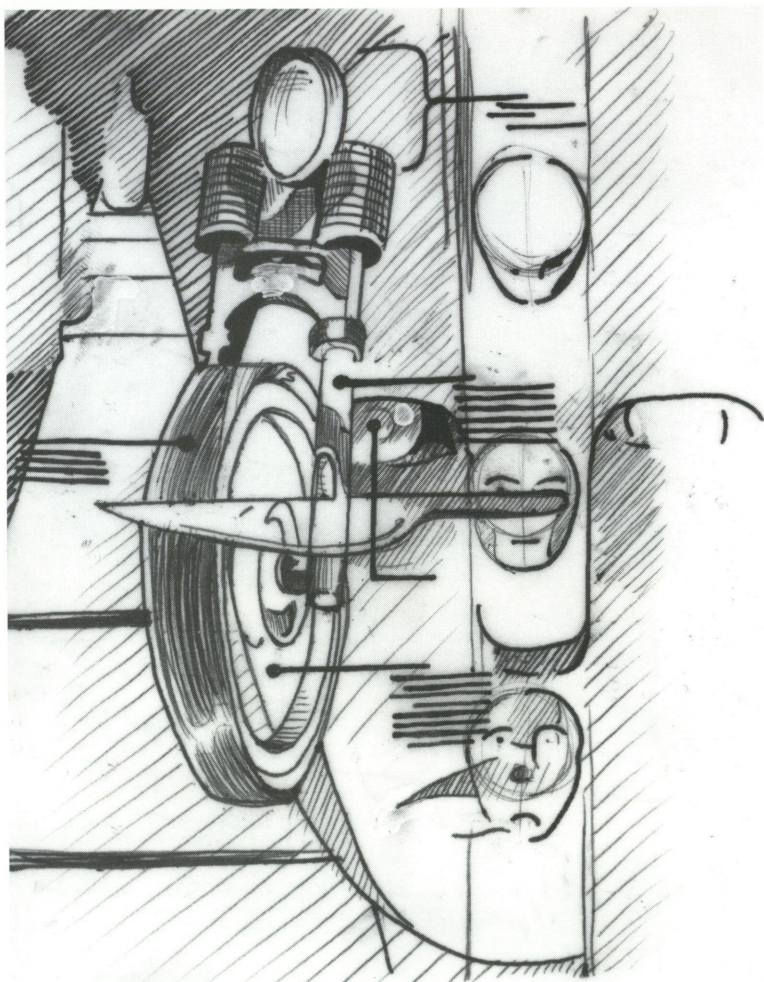
I fell  
over the edge of your smile,  
squinting into the depth  
of my silly self-denial.  
My pool of drooling lunacy.  
Perverse, pathetic poetry.

Bungling, half-sleeping Beauty,  
creeping drunk  
in the direction of the wrong fairy tale.

Seeking out her reflection in the dark--  
Stumbling,  
Fumbling  
for the mirror  
mirror  
mirror  
of your grin,  
written in bright green graffiti on the wall.

Teetering on my tiptoes,  
twisting my lips  
to a smile from a frown.  
Wondering why  
we all fall  
down.





Adam Heet

Lauren J. Holder driving - (a confessional)

i.

going out only so far as the light can shine  
moving just slightly faster than the recommended speed  
exploring the solitude of a countryside - its divide.

inhaling deep and the roadside strewn with weeds and husks  
warning of a danger as i continued in my thick trance  
missing the warning sign that prophesized "soft shoulder."

failing to foresee,  
swerving off the road,  
slamming on the breaks,  
spinning tires-out of control.

ii.

(contorted and fragmented)  
found next to the tree, pierced by shards,  
she drove herself to a solitude too great.

mangled, she bled in vein.  
(discovered after the night had passed)  
not a soul came near after the crash.

distorted, the police thought she tried it  
found no motive, a good life.  
(but she was not designed to survive in this world)



**K**elley Johnson  
Pictures of Intoxication in Mid-July

by midnight she was  
dripping red angels  
beneath crimson Christmas strands  
the only source of light in  
their saturated wilderness

they kept their vigil by it  
while she, alone in the bathtub  
-save the company of spiders and  
leaden paint chippings-

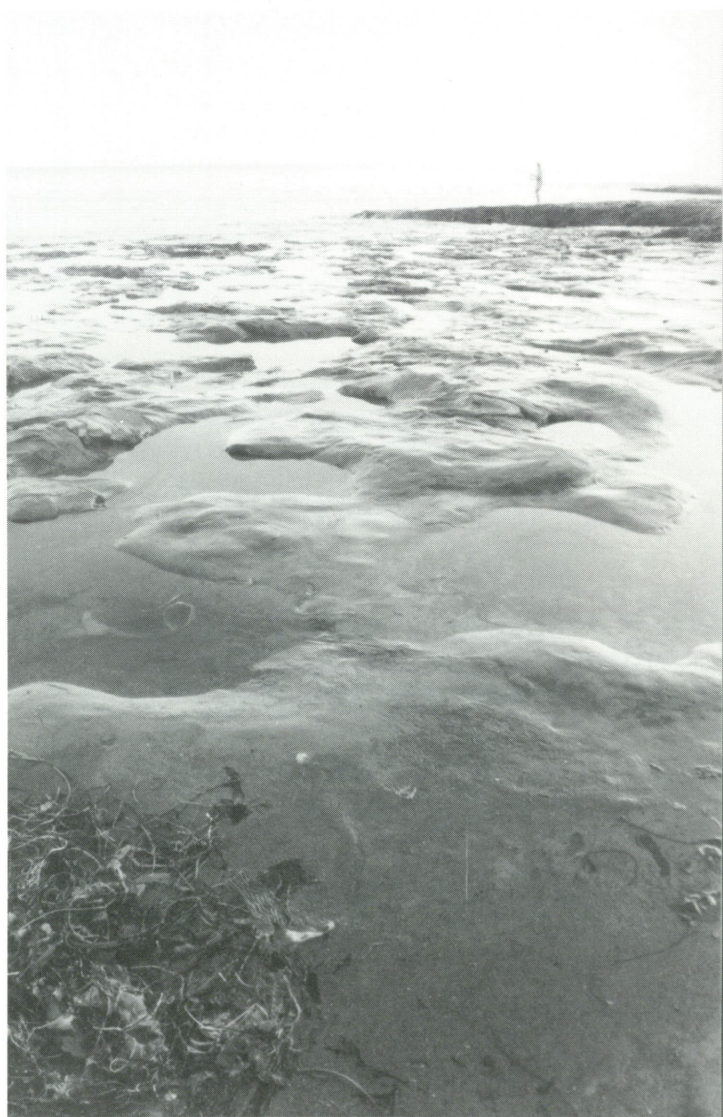
murmured her musings to  
the ghosts of summers past  
as their flashbulbs burst  
and her seaweed hair stank

in the dank basement hollow  
under a cold faucet running  
she remained, half-alive  
propped against the cracked porcelain  
of her guiltless insanity  
for those who would not pass her by.

Willie Stephen    I AM WHAT YOU MAKE ME



Dirk van der Duim  
Santa Cruz #7



Today I ran on the endless white line  
of a country road  
whose banks and borders  
were growing, wild and blind;  
dying, wild and blind.

Dried, graceful arthritis of spent seed pods  
hung like Christmas decorations  
and I thought.  
(breathed.)  
God. Make me that natural.

Jamie Brand  
12 mile stream

Sarah "Otto" Marxhausen

I Could Just Eat You Up

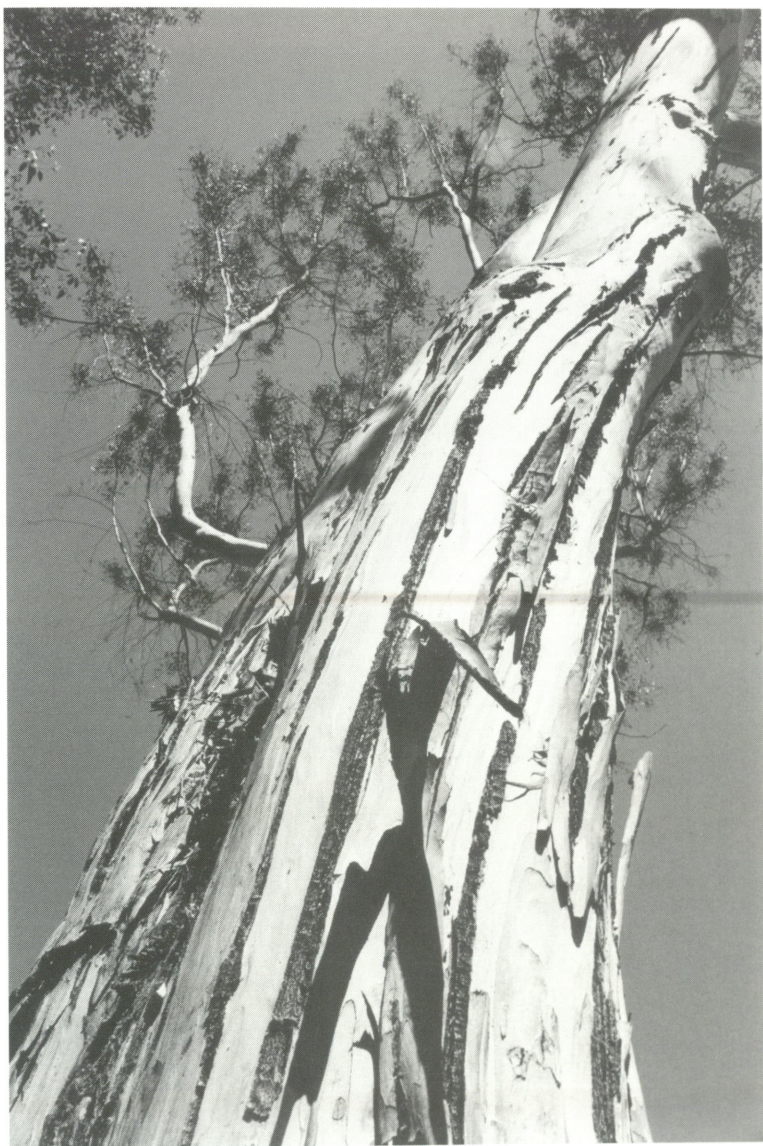
Turn your devouring eyes away from me.  
It's true my life is ruled by hunger;  
But not the kind you think.  
You find my children missing  
And the blood smeared on my mouth,  
So you point your fingers downward to ward off my frightful  
gaze.

I am eaten alive every day by my husband's eyes,  
His need for my body  
And his fruitless demands to know what lies beneath my  
sphinx's face.

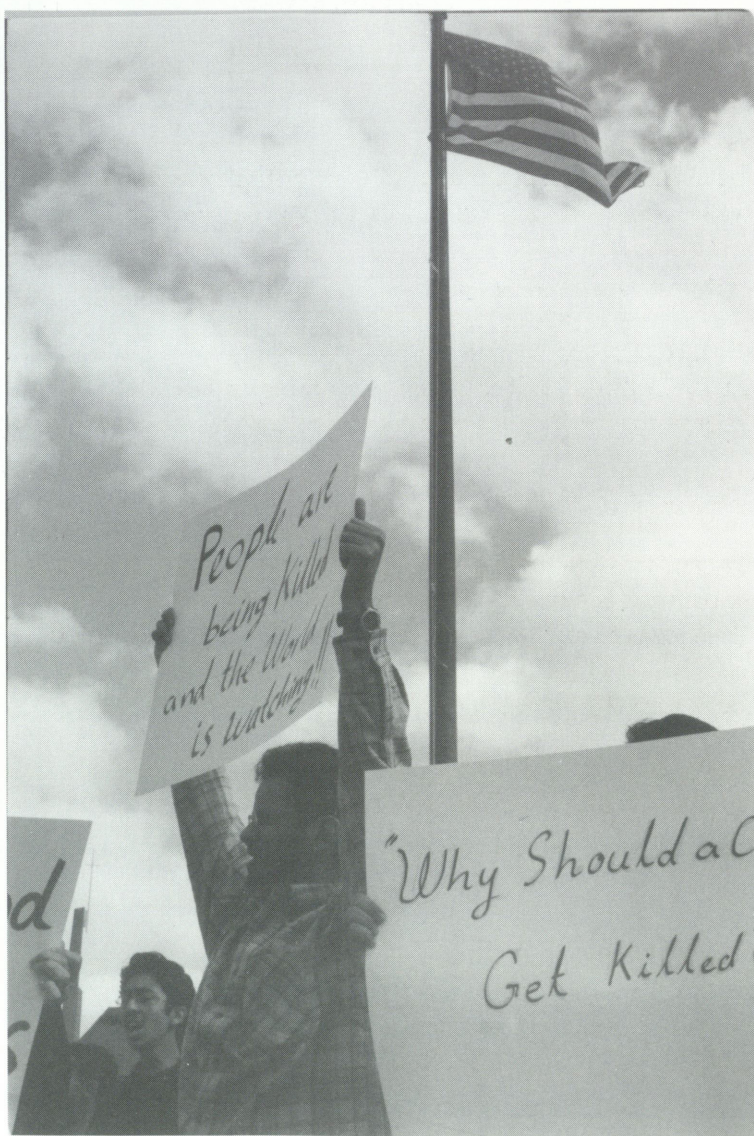
I am eaten dozens of times a day by you,  
By the others,  
Who corrode me with their suspicions.  
I can see in their hollow eyes their wish to have me burned,  
Their greedy stares  
Reviving the taste of blood on my lips.  
And my life is eaten by *her*,  
The thief who comes and looses my tongue for a minute,  
Who stares at me hungrily for satisfaction.  
These lips that never part in speech never felt human flesh  
slide between them.

But my children are still eaten.  
She and I,  
We ate them with our pride.





Wendy Albrecht



**R**odger Hoke

Armando X. Fernandez  
Quake's Refrain

the plaster caked ceiling...  
ripples as the unexpected wrenching finally stops...  
awakening us from our nightly brush with fated flight.

It was two am and hoping-

painted walls detail the strain...  
put upon them by the violent rhythmic cadence...  
of some fluid plated core, unknown to those of surface existence.

It was two "0" one am and waiting-

our crusted sleep filled eyes greet the tranquility...  
the unbearable vulgar screams of the silence...  
repercussion and understanding that hope has dimmed.

It was two "0" two am and looking-

moistened bed sheets betray our stifling fear...  
soiled memory rakes it's banks for more lucid times...  
flailing flashes of blistered agony snatches reality awake.

It was two "0" three am and pretending-

Thunderous claps of fear strike through the body complete...  
Bring on the sense of dread that more is yet come...  
Smaller waves adjust the plated layers back into place.

It was two "0" four am and holding-

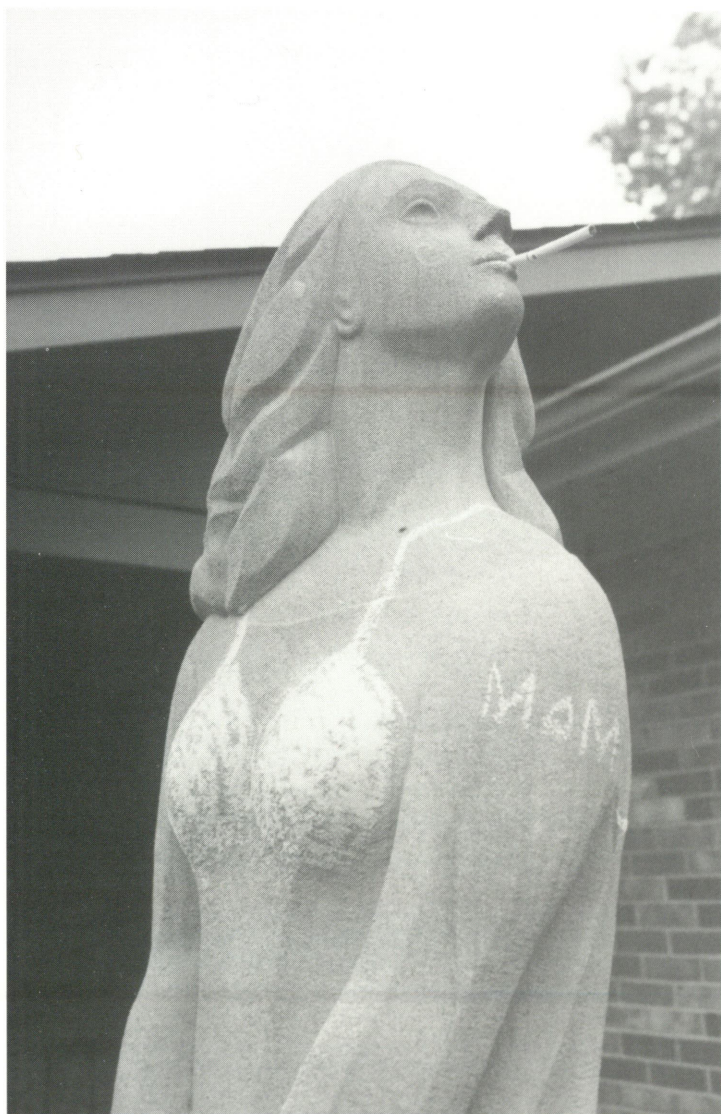
sirens, horns, and alarms bludgeon senses straight...  
as the earth settles back to rest...  
our night is just starting.

It was two "0" five am and praying.



**L**isa Farver  
Still

She's still a virgin  
when she shuts her eyes  
Her thighs squeezed tight  
around her white ideals \*  
she feels her balance slipping...  
She only sleeps with nightlights on  
her fingers on the telephone  
are tripping past his numbers.  
The shades are shut  
the curtain's drawn.  
She sleepwalks, drunk  
with nothing on  
She whispers  
but she's home alone.  
Her world is stuck in slumber.



Dirk van der Duim

Jessica C. Pleuss  
Road Trip

A measured calm  
Finally settles over  
Us  
Piles of arms  
Legs  
Bodies carelessly  
Tossed about  
And left for  
The night  
To work its magic.



Matt Maher  
Union Street



Lynne Albert



Tonya McGue  
Upper Class

Would she inherit  
the composure required  
of all well-bred  
city girls?  
Under her mother's  
watchful eyes,  
she slowly  
placed her hand on her  
rumbling belly  
as they rattled  
past the country fair  
and the sweet smells  
of candy half hidden  
in burlap bags.  
Barefoot children darted  
across the dusty lane  
and she remembered  
to sit straight  
like her mother  
in the springy back seat  
of her dad's new  
gasoline-powered automobile.  
But she couldn't stop  
the kinks from forming  
across her delicate nose  
as it took in  
the unfamiliar odors  
of the animal barns.



I HATE SHAKESPEARE

Erin Creed

Juliet, why don't you run?  
No need to sit,  
bemoan your fate;  
you had the chance  
why do you wait?

Juliet, you stupid bitch~  
fair Verona  
makes you want to  
scream and die, so  
why don't you fly?

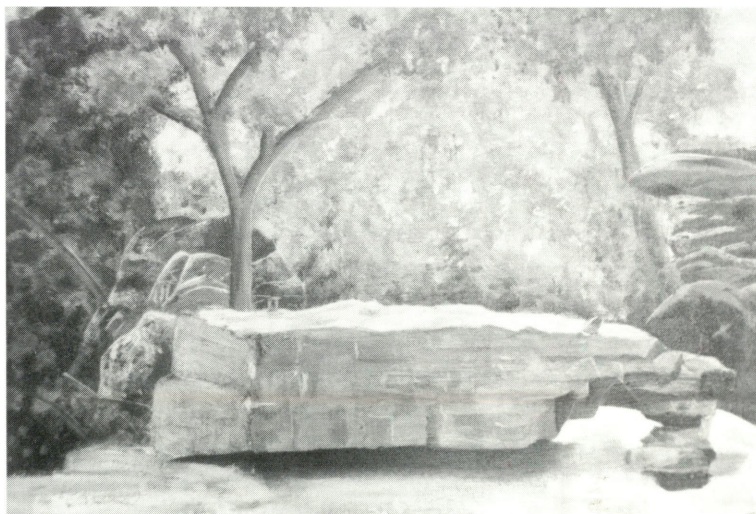
Juliet, it can't be right  
to sit and wait  
all through the night  
when your true love  
has taken flight.

Those words you said,  
the love you made,  
couldn't make you disobey.  
Daddy's girl until the last,  
you could have played it

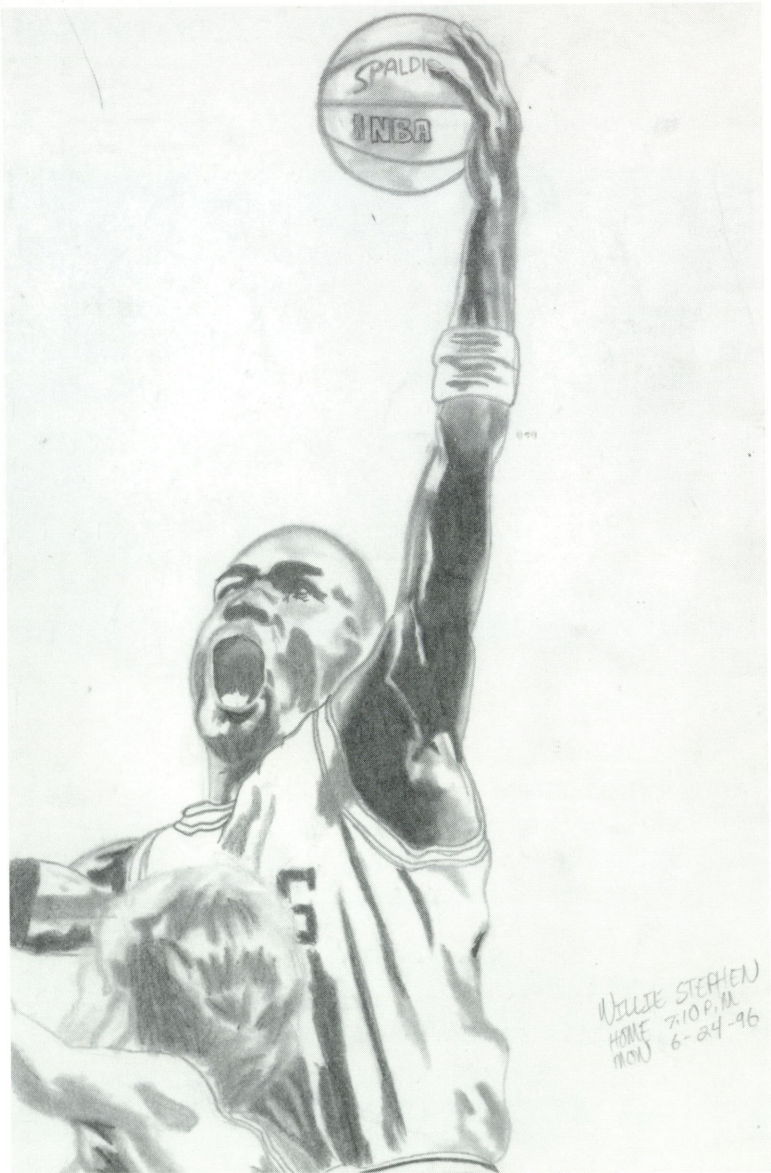
hard and fast,

and run away to Mantua  
to find the boy  
who gave you joy -  
instead you die...  
alone.

Juliet, why don't you run?  
you have the chance  
what makes you stay?



Jenny Prudhomme  
The Rock



**W**illie Stephen

Lisa Farver  
Whizzing Swiftly By

Mismatched socks  
splish-splashing  
through puddles  
in the middle of a busy highway  
Toes soaked  
and cold,  
boldly  
prancing  
in the road  
spinning  
in a  
fred astaire tapdance trance  
too dizzy  
to notice the traffic  
swerving  
to the side  
and whizzing swiftly by

# Heather Meriweather

## With and Without Words

She sat on the edge of the bed  
looking at him with her questioning eyes  
hoping to protect some of her quickly fading pride.  
Her love for the one in front of her was deep,  
so deep that she could swim in it.  
He stood, his body language emanating rigidity  
a figure of confusion and immaturity  
not knowing how much he was adored.  
He told her, through words and silence,  
that she was not the one and may never reach that plateau in  
his heart.

He reaffirmed all of her greatest fears  
with every word he did and did not say  
every reason he did and did not explain  
and she could not help but let one question remain:  
"Why?"

After all this time, nothing had really changed.  
Season turned into season and minutes turned into hours  
and still she held as much prestige as she ever did in his life  
carrying the frustration of a sideshow lover and the patience  
of a lonely wife.

She dared not to look into his eyes  
for in them, she saw where she wanted to be  
A look in the midst of his iris that she believed spoke of love  
said absolutely nothing at all.  
She kissed him, sweetly, slowly, sadly  
and then she retreated as if to avoid venom.  
He returned the gesture with passion  
unaware that she had already said goodbye.



Cindy Zuniga





Rodger Hoke

PICTURE FRAMES Laura Felch

Every morning my kitchen window  
Shows me the fragmented picture  
Of children playing at recess.  
Animated bundles of bright cloth  
Bob over the blacktop  
Like buoys lost in a stormy sea.  
Perhaps, in a chasm of the crowd,  
I will discover a concealed observer.

Today I find one nestled comfortably  
Against a red brick wall apart  
From the cold of the winter wind  
And the chill of her classmates.  
Her pen poised above a bent binder,  
Her eyes search this selected scene--  
A school yard full of children.

She may slice a story  
From this sliver of characters,  
And fill a script with drama  
Surpassing all possible reality  
Of those lives she observes.

Yet as my window pane frames  
This girl passionately writing,  
I wonder if she knows  
What it means when you  
Make the choice to write  
About children in a playground  
Rather than being a child  
Who plays.

## Adam Heet



Lisa Farver  
Shy

My hand blushes  
high  
on her thigh--  
and I frown,  
looking down,  
wondering who put it there...

But I think  
one more drink  
and I'll know where I'm at.  
And I'll dry myself off  
and forget how she sat  
Silhouette in fluorescent half-light  
with a cigarette butt  
in her laughing half-smile.

I'm swallowing hard.  
I'm lingering back.  
And my fingers are trembling,  
shy in her lap.





Liv Larson

Dirk van der Dium  
Redemption  
Based upon Ezekiel 37.

Dry bones. Lying in the valley. Waiting. Sun bearing down upon them. Squeezing and extracting any moisture that might have remained, any life that might have been present. Casting its scorching rays into this desert furnace. Penetrating, chapping, and parching these dry bones. Faces that once smiled. Piles upon piles of skulls and mandibles. Legs which once ran with powerful grace. Now heaps and collections of femurs, tibias and fibulae. Disconnected and dry. Bleached white fingers outstretched. Ligaments long since dried up and gone, picked clean by vultures and scavengers. Empty eye sockets staring east and west, at the ground, at the sky. A fixed gaze. Shadows thrown to the ground. Sundials suspended above the earth to mark the day's progress. Dry bones. Final and devoid of hope.

And amidst this lifeless confusion, a voice. Pushing up from the earth. Through my toes and legs and into my body. Welling inside my soul. An awesome and powerful presence surrounding every ounce of my being. And a question: "Son of man, can these bones live again?" I answered, "Lord, only you know." Then came words of impossibility. "Prophecy to these bones, these dead and dry bones. Speak to them in my name, and they will breathe the breath of life and know me." So I spoke as my God had commanded.

Then slowly at first, and trembling in a furious rising clatter, the bones began to move. Bone upon bone, each jumping into place, reassembled and bound as the human frames they once were. Muscles and nerves and blood vessels. Lungs and hearts filling dried up rib cages, and greasy marrow in the femurs and tibias and fibulae. At the ends of outstretched arms, fleshy fingers with swirling ridges to mark them. Bodies regaining that majestically sculpted human form. And my astonished spirit confounded past words as I beheld. Eyes and ears and open nostrils... But no breath.

A legion of dead bodies lying in the valley.



Children. Women. Men. Naked in the sun, where before, the dry bones had been. Blood in their arteries, filling their flesh. Present in their hearts, but still. Motionless and lifeless. Air filling the lungs, but no breath. Dead. Bones covered with muscles and skin. Filled with marrow, but little better than before. Still no breath.

Thoughts beginning. Wondering... But then the voice. Before a doubt could solidify, the voice of the Lord, saying, "Prophecy to the breath, son of man. Command the breath, and it shall rush from the ends of the earth and fill them with life." I spoke as he had told me. And a living wind came from every direction, blowing in me and through me and past me, into these bodies. Into those slain, those beyond hope - the dry bones, dead and gone and fallen asleep long ago. And into these empty bodies, BREATH! Chests heaving as in the burning cry. Hearts inside given a rhythm to keep. Clenching and releasing, pushing the once still blood through arteries and capillaries and veins.

Dead eyes opening. Static gazes given up for living sight. Touches shooting through nerves. And thought. Ideas forming inside recreated minds. Praises. Prayers to their maker. Finding balance and rising to their feet, they stood before me, a multitude beyond what I could even hope to count. Bones, then bodies, and now new creations of the Lord. Formed by his Word and infused with the Spirit.

And he told me to go. "Tell my people that I am their God. That though their bones are dry and the spirit has left them, I will guide and protect them and raise them up. I will resurrect them from their graves and breathe my spirit into their empty, longing souls. I will make their hearts leap within their chests in praise of me, and I will make every breath and every word a prayer of thanksgiving. I will once again draw them close by the power of my unfailing love and give them eternal life in me."

Cindy Zuniga



Liam J. Whitney

Reflections from the Hospital Waiting Room

You know, I came to the realization today that I'm not much of a writer after all. It's like, maybe I can write poetry and such, but I'm not much of a story writer. All in all, you just keep getting to the same conclusion: There's only so much you can say.

It's when your best friend's mom is on her deathbed, and your own mom's a wreck because you dropped out of college, that's when you have time to think about these things. It's when you're looking for work and not finding anything but you need money to go back to school someday and you're not too well yourself from a mental standpoint, that's when you reconcile things for yourself. There's not much else to do when you're not playing hearts on your computer. Besides, you're looking to escape your life anyhow, so you look inside and try to reconcile your future. Pretty ironic, but nonetheless true.

I know I've wanted to die many times in this past year. It's true. Thing that keeps me from doing something about it though, I want to die in a really cool way. Like going through an airplane propeller or something. Thing is, it would suck if you made it at that point. I mean, come on. How screwed would you end up if you survived something like that? You'd have half a face, if that. That's another thing right there.

But, having my best friend's mom going through her last hours makes you think. If nothing else, you just see that here's someone about to kick the big one, and it's all drawn out, and everyone's so sad. And you just think, "Man, that's not how I want to go."

A member of this woman's family has wanted to pull the plug on her since she got into this whole mess, with the stroke and the brain bleeds and all that. He's an idiot, or at least everyone else thinks so. I'm not one to judge. Seeing how this

shook out, though, you wonder how accurate that label is. Pulling the plug would have saved everyone a lot of trouble, the way I see it. But, I suppose you want to do all you can, so you can sleep better after the inevitable does go down.

I never want to die like that woman in there, though. Unconscious, and been that way for weeks, and having a machine breathe for her. Family all over the place, and yet she's all alone. I never want that to happen to me.

When I go, I want it to be quick. There can be pain, as long as I know it'll end soon enough. I would gladly take thirty years off the end of my life to die some cool way, some way that people would talk about.

I may have aspirations. I want to announce baseball games, and I wanted to write once. That was before I came to the conclusion that I can't write any kind of story anyhow. If nothing else, though, I want to get eaten by wolves, or getting stoned would be cool. Downright medieval, you might say. I know it is, but it's not something anyone could ever take away from me.

Like you could mess that up. I mean, come on.



Wendy Albrecht



# Daniel Noto

## HELPING HANDS

"Okay, that *was* pretty good," said Daniel Shepherd, pausing for effect, "...but do you want to see something *really* scary?"

It was 10:45 on a Friday night. Dan was sprawled on his bed in Memorial Hall, best friend Amy Madison at his side. Pete Wolf, his roommate, was sitting across the room, backed up against the wall behind his bed along with everyone's mutual friend Shelly White. Everybody was midway through their sophomore year at Valparaiso University, and the dorm room's television was scrolling through the end credits of the movie *Halloween*. The film's famous soundtrack was piping through the speakers in Pete's stereo.

"What are you *talking* about?" demanded Pete. "That wasn't scary at all! I hate old scary movies."

"It was kinda funny, actually," Shelly added.

"Well, then," said Dan, grinning evilly, "I'll repeat the offer. Do you guys want to see something *really* scary?"

Amy shook her head fiercely. "Nuh-uh, no thanks. That was plenty scary for me. Nooo siiir, I'm all scared-out."

Shelly, however, was mildly curious. "What do you have in mind, and why do I feel that you're going to ask to borrow my car?"

Dan smiled broadly, and there was something undeniably *wolfish* about his grin. "Shelly...I am *so* glad you asked."

Just over an hour later, the four were well on their way. Dan was behind the wheel of Shelly's Dodge Neon coupe. Shelly was riding shotgun. Pete and Amy were in the backseat, simultaneously wondering how - and *why* - they'd let Dan drag them on yet another late-night expedition to scare the crap out of themselves. Dan's giant mega-powered heavy-duty flashlight rested firmly in Shelly's hands. Idle conversation for the first hour or so had broken down a little while ago, and the four had fallen into silence. They weren't even listening to the radio.

"I can't believe I agreed to let you do this," said Shelly, finally breaking the silence. "And I can't believe even *more* that I'm actually letting you drive my car."



Dan laughed. "You're letting me drive 'cause I'm the only one who knows the way, and you don't like night driving," he said. "Besides, bad things happen when I get stuck in the backseat of this bucket." Shelly glared at him. Dan pretended not to notice and went on. "And I'm guessing you agreed to come with because the other two wanted to go and you wanted to supervise your baby," he added, referring to the car.

"Yeah. Bad things tend to happen when I add you to this car."

Dan scowled at her. "I only fell through one window, you know, and it's not like I didn't have help."

"Hey, knock it off, you two," said Amy from the backseat. "We're here to get scared, not to bicker. And you're not the only one who can't believe that she's coming along, Shelly."

"Well, I, for one, am seriously looking forward to losing my pants," said Pete. Everyone stared at him, including Dan. "I mean, having them scared off!" he added, grinning.

Everyone rolled their eyes. "Lame!" declared the driver.

"I'm shocked, Pete," said Amy. "Dan the Psychopath Nutbar's been driving for over an hour and you still have your pants?"

"It's been over an *hour*?" Pete gasped. "Come on, Dan, at least tell us where we're *going*!"

The others expressed similar pleas. Dan only smiled and shook his head. "I don't think so, kids," he said. "This is gonna be a surprise." He paused. "Besides..." He rolled the car slowly to a stop on a seldom-used gravel road, flanked on either side by tall trees. The Neon crunched over the gravel, over a few small but lurching bumps, and gradually came to a stop. He killed the engine, then the lights.

"...we're here," he finished.

The other kids looked around. Pete was the first to speak.

"Okay, we're here. However, am I the only one to find it odd that 'here' is the middle of a deserted road in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night?" He examined their surroundings more closely as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. "And are railroad tracks really the best place to stop a car?" he added, pointing to a pair of dilapidated rail-

road gates - one in front of the car, another behind. The machinery behind them had dropped its gate at some point; only the pole remained. The one in front, to their left, had fallen down and was now permanently blocking traffic - not that there *was* any.

Shelly turned to Dan. "You get this car off these railroad tracks right now or you're never driving it again."

He held his hands up in a gesture of surrender. "Relax, tiger," he said, "I already checked. No railroad line's used these tracks in over fifteen years. Not since..." he paused a moment before dramatically dropping his voice an octave, "...the *accident*."

"What accident?" asked Amy, her voice anxious. She hated these stupid expeditions, but went along anyway. It beat sitting in the dorms on a Friday night, and there wasn't a hell of a lot else to do in Valparaiso, Indiana.

"Oh, man, here it comes," said Pete. "The horror story."

Dan looked at them solemnly, twisting around in the seat so he could see all of them. "Well, I'll tell you." He paused dramatically. Dan was a big fan of the dramatic pause. "This isn't just any railroad crossing, and this isn't just any road." He looked around, feigning nervousness. "This is the sight of a massacre."

Shelly and Amy exchanged nervous glances, while Pete only scoffed. "Your delivery needs work, Dan."

"Ah, shut up," Dan said, momentarily destroying his semi-frightening demeanor. "Let me tell you all what happened, and maybe then you'll have a little more respect."

"Now, when I first heard of this...this *tragedy*, I thought it was just folklore. Not so. I looked it up in the local papers, and this really happened." He licked his lips and went on. It was obvious that this story crept out even him. "Anyway...on this very railroad crossing, on this very road...over two dozen children met a gruesome demise."

Amy gasped. "That's horrible! Why on earth-"

Shelly broke in. "You know, Danny, if you think the most constructive use of my time on a Friday night is hearing stories of mass murders-"

Amy went on. "If this is your idea of entertainment, you sick little freak-"

Pete started up. "Really, Dan, you may be crossing the line here."

He held up a hand, silencing them all. "It's not what you think. It's bad, but it's not as bad as some of the stuff I've told you. This wasn't a mass murder or anything like that. Just a really, really bad accident. A tragedy. Okay?"

Shelly and Amy glared at him. Pete waved his hand dismissively. "Okay, what happened?" he asked.

Dan looked at each of them. "It was a traffic accident. A school bus, on its way to an elementary school just over that rise..." - here he pointed through the windshield- "...stalled on the tracks. As you'd expect, knowing the outcome, there was a train coming, and there wasn't any time to get any of the kids off." The car fell silent. "Nobody was able to get off in time. Nobody. Twenty-six kids and two adults died in the crash and the fire that followed. It was horrible."

"But it doesn't end there," he went on. Pete mumbled something about "of course not," but he continued nonetheless. "After the deaths of so many of its children, the town was torn apart. Most of the families moved away. The school's population was cut in half, what with all the kids dying, and it shut down pretty soon after. A lot of the businesses went belly up. So, this little whistle-stop town effectively ceased to exist."

He looked around again. "Now, everything I've just told you is true. You can all read the newspaper articles about the crash itself and the rapid decline that followed. Amy, you were even there in the library when I was looking all of this up." He looked to her for verification, which she reluctantly provided. "But what I'm about to tell all of you is nothing you'll find in any paper."

"Now, imagine you were the train conductor that day. Being safe inside that nice big train, he got by without a scratch. Not a cut or a bruise. But he had the best seat in the house for the carnage that he caused."

"He didn't *cause* it," said Shelly abruptly, startling all of them. "He had nothing to do with the bus. It was an accident!"

Dan narrowed his eyes. "But see, that's the *thing*!" There was always a *thing* when Dan told a story. "The train conductor felt responsible. He felt like the whole thing was his fault. The kids' deaths, the town falling apart, he felt like *he caused it all*. He died a short time later...from guilt, was the general consensus. Hence...the ghost."



The three other kids were all listening intently.  
 "WHAT ghost?!" they all demanded, simultaneously.

"Well," Dan said slowly, "the conductor was so haunted by what he'd allegedly done that he *became* a haunt. Part of the reason the town fell apart the way it did, part of the reason everyone moved away, was that, after the hapless conductor died, they said the train continued to run."

"What do you mean?" asked Amy in a soft voice.

Dan's answer came in an even softer voice. "Well...the locals starting hearing...noises. Like, a train on the tracks. Only, there *was* no train...as I said, the train hadn't run since the crash...it was totally destroyed in the accident. And then, later...they started hearing noises of the accident itself. Brakes screeching. An explosion. Metal crunching. Screaming..."

He looked at the others. Shelly was glaring at him, Amy looked like she was about to cry. Pete, however, had an eyebrow raised.

"Dan," he said, "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. I mean, could that have been hokier? Come on, are you trying for a shutout for the Lamest Unfrightening Story Award? That sucked."

Dan frowned. "Well, fine then. If the story didn't scare you, maybe you'll be scared by what happens next."

Amy frowned. "You mean what *happened* next. This is still part of the story."

Dan looked at her. "No, I mean, what *happens* next. *This* is real life."

Amy glared. "Explain! Now!"

Dan held up his hands. "Alright, already! Well, there's something about the ghost train that I didn't mention. There was only one time of day, in all the -years since this tragedy happened, that anyone ever heard the ghost train." He paused as the others gasped, realizing where this was going.

"MIDNIGHT," he said in a deep melodramatic voice.  
 They all looked at the dash clock.

It said 11:59. Dan grinned.

"Oh, *man*," said Amy. "I HATE when you do shit like this! So what happens now?! A ghost train runs us over?!"

Dan shrugged. "I dunno. Something like that."

She leaned forward and grabbed his shirt. "YOU

*DON'T KNOW?!"*

Dan yelped. "Hey, relax! The ghost train has never hurt anybody! You think this conductor would run over *two* sets of school kids?!"

She released his shirt. "I still say we watch this from far, far away!"

He scowled. "That would be cheating. Besides...it's *too late*." He pointed at the dashboard clock.

Midnight.

"Oh, *man*," Pete said softly. "Suddenly I wish I was anywhere but here."

They waited in a terrified silence.

Midnight came and went. 12:01 came next, followed, as anticipated, by 12:02, 12:03 and 12:04, in that order. Nothing happened.

When five minutes past twelve rolled around, Dan shrugged. "I guess nothing's gonna happen." He turned the ignition key.

The only sound the car made was a *click*.

"What the *hell*-" Dan said sharply as he turned the key again and held it there. The engine didn't even turn over. "What gives?!" he cried.

Shelly turned to him. "What's wrong?" she asked sharply.

"This piece a'crap won't *START*!" he exploded. Panic erupted in the car.

"Just turn the key, you moron!" Shelly burst. "IT'LL *START*!"

Amy shouted, "OH SHIT! WE'RE STALLED OUT! THIS BETTER NOT BE WHAT I THINK IT IS!"

Pete said in a very anxious voice, "Uh, might I suggest vacating the vehicle? *NOW*?!"

Everyone started talking at once. The volume had escalated to an ear-shattering level when a sudden *THUMP* silenced everyone.

"*WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT*?!" Amy exploded.

"Shut up!" Dan barked, eyes wide in terror. "Quiet, *NOW*!"

The thud noise came again, from the back of the car. The Neon rolled forward a few inches. Gravel crunched



under it. Amy screamed.

"What the hell is going on?!" Pete demanded.

"Shut *up*!" Dan screamed. "I don't *know*!"

The car rolled forward another inch, then two. It was picking up speed.

Dan frantically checked the rearview mirror, adjusted it. There was nothing behind them, nothing pushing the car...nothing that he could see, anyway. He looked behind them again. Nothing appeared in the rear window, nothing behind the car.

Sounds came through the open windows. Straining sounds. High-pitched creaking and groaning. Metal, maybe.

The car was still moving. The back tires were almost off the tracks now. There was a hollow thud and a lurch as the rear wheels passed over the railroad tracks. Amy yelped, and Pete put an arm around her. The speedometer had ticked upward and leveled off at five miles per hour. Now, it nosed slowly back down to zero. The sounds of gravel crunching under the car slowed and stopped, like a bag of popcorn that's through cooking.

The Neon stopped moving.

The four students sat in silence.

"What in the *hell*," asked Peter, his voice barely a whisper, "was *that*?"

Dan took a long time to answer. "I haven't a clue. And I'm not exactly relishing the thought of finding out." He turned to stare at the door handle, dreading the thought of leaving the relative comfort of the Neon. He grabbed the Maglite up off the floor and reached for the door handle.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Pete demanded. "Are you *insane*? Did you not just *watch* a scary movie?! Don't go *outside*, you moron!"

Dan frowned. "I have to. I need to see if there's anything caught up on the car before we can get out of here."

Pete shook his head. "You're nuts, man."

Shelly reached for her door handle. "I'm coming, too."

Dan looked at her. "You're sure?"

She nodded. "When it's your time to die, it's your time to die."

Dan stared at her. "Well, thank you for that pleasant thought," he said, bitterly.

Shelly winked. "I didn't say it was our time."

Dan didn't respond. He turned on the headlights to

provide a little more illumination. He opened the door, said, "Let's hope you're right." He stepped out of the car. There was nothing lurking on the side of the Neon, under the Neon, or in the woods on either side of the Neon. The two got the scare of their lives, however, when they stepped to the rear of the little car.

Inside the car, Amy and Pete flinched when they heard Shelly say "*Jesus Christ!*" and Dan yelp in shock. They scrambled out of the car and ran to the rear.

Both kids were staring at the trunk in shock. Shelly's hand was over her mouth, and Dan's expression seemed to indicate he was staring at a corpse: undisguised revulsion.

"What?! What?!" Pete demanded. Dan pointed to the car.

The Maglite had slipped out of Dan's frozen hands and come to rest in a depression in the gravel. The lens was cracked down the middle, but the flashlight was still shining bravely on, and it was pointed directly at the trunk of the coupe.

"Aw, crap," Pete breathed. "Not cool." Amy didn't say anything at all.

In the course of the hour-long journey, the Neon had been thoroughly covered in road dust, especially since the majority of the trip was over gravel. The car was dark green to begin with, and the combination made the most terrifying element of the evening stand out like a knife stuck in the wall.

The trunk, the bumper, the taillights, and the license plate were all covered in handprints. Dozens of handprints. *Small* handprints.

*Child-sized* handprints.

No one spoke.

"Oh my God," Pete said again. His voice was so quiet that the others barely heard him.

Shelly slowly bent, picked up the flashlight, and shined it on the back of the car. The handprints screamed off the trunk. For the first time, they noticed a pink ribbon stuck in the space between the license plate and the bumper. One end was shredded.

After a moment, Shelly spoke. "This wasn't a prank, was it." It was more of a statement than a question.

Dan whispered his reply. "No. The...the, uh, the ghost train, that was a joke. Made it all up. But this...this...I didn't have a *clue* that this place was actually-"

Pete cut him off. His voice was a whisper, but overshadowed Dan's voice anyway. "That straining noise. That wasn't metal, was it. That was *them*. That was the *kids*!"

There was a pause while that sank in. "Um," Amy said, "how about we discuss this later? Remember? Safe distance?"

Shelly shook her head. "The car won't start. It's stalled out."

Dan shook *his* head. "No, that was part of the prank. The car won't start because I left it in drive. I never shifted into park when we stopped, and no car with an automatic transmission will start in any gear but park or neutral."

Pete glared at him. "You asshole! What are you trying to do, scare us to *death*?!"

Dan scowled back. "You can ream me out later. Right now, 'Fleeing in terror' tops out *my* list of priorities."

Suddenly, Dan was cut off again. But this time, it was not by speech. The night was shattered by a laugh. A high-pitched, innocent-sounding, terrifying laugh.

A child's laugh.

It came from the railroad tracks, off to their left.

Shelly was so startled that she dropped the flashlight. It landed lens-down on a rock in the road and immediately shattered. The night was cast into darkness.

Silence again. It suddenly occurred to Dan, as his blood turned to ice, that the night was perfectly silent. No wind, no crickets, nothing. Total silence.

Another child's voice. Off to their right. "Bye-bye!" it whispered, gender-neutral, laughter in its voice. A giggle.

Everyone froze, too scared to move, too scared even to scream. They all stared down the tracks, either right or left, urgently searching the silent darkness.

Dan was the first to move. He backed slowly up to the Neon, fighting the urge to leap in and peel out.

"Get in," he said, softly. "Now."

Pete and Shelly scrambled into the backseat. Amy slowly lowered herself into the passenger seat and pulled the door shut. Dan collapsed into the driver's seat and slammed the door. It sounded way louder than it should have in the silent, frightened night.



Feeling like he was moving through water, Dan reached for the shifter and knocked it into neutral. He reached for the key.

*Please, God, let it work,* he thought, as he turned the key.

The engine hiccupped into life. *Oh thank God,* he thought.

Just as Dan was shifting into Drive, just as he thought that they might actually get out of this situation with their lives *and* their sanity, another sound came from behind the car, audible even in the passenger cabin.

A little girl. Screaming.

Dan gave in to his terror and crushed the accelerator. The Neon screamed into the night, kicking up pounds of gravel as the little car flew off into the night.

Behind them, silence returned. For a moment.

Then, the only remaining crossing gate creaked into life. The gate slowly raised itself, creaking and popping, into its upright position.

After that, silence reclaimed the night, this time for good.

The four students made it halfway back to their school before stopping. They drove in a terrified silence, Pete and Shelly holding each other in the backseat, Dan driving with one hand and holding Amy with the other, who herself was holding Dan with her left hand and her cross with her right. Everyone was too scared to speak. Once they'd reached a populated area, Dan pulled over in a Wal-Mart parking lot. He was shaking too badly to control the vehicle. Once his tremors had subsided, they continued on, headed for their school.

No one spoke until a few drops of rain flicked the windshield. After a few minutes, enough had accumulated that Dan turned on the windshield wipers.

"Washed away," said Pete, breaking the silence and startling them all.

"What?" Dan gasped, a moment later.

"The handprints. They'll all be washed away," he explained, softly.

"Good," said Shelly, finality in her voice. Silence

reclaimed the passenger cabin.

They arrived at school. Dan cut the ignition and handed the keys to Shelly. They disembarked and headed for their rooms with nary a word spoken.

The four students silently parted ways at the stairwell, between the third and fourth floors. As Dan and Pete shuffled past the lounge on the way to their room, neither of them noticed that the ancient television was switched on, shattering the evening's solitude with its discordant ramblings.

Inside the lounge, a commercial ended and a newscast began. A slim woman in her thirties with an outdated hairstyle appeared on the screen. "Good evening, and welcome. This is the channel five eleven o'clock news," she said, though it was well past one in the morning. "Our top story tonight, September 19, 1984, is one of the most tragic events this news-team has recorded. An early-morning crash has left twenty-six children and two adults dead." The picture switched from the news-desk to the scene of the accident. The remains of a school bus were spread all over the foreground. In the background, a swarm of squad cars, fire engines, ambulances and hearses were scattered all over the scene. Behind one police car, but still clearly visible, was one lone, insignificant 1995 Dodge Neon coupe. The announcer continued in a voice-over. "Authorities are still looking into the causes of the accident. Hopefully, investigation of the disaster will improve railroad crossings in this part of the country, and some good will come from so much harm." In the background, near the car that couldn't possibly be there, a little girl with a pink ribbon in her hair waved solemnly at the camera. She turned and walked into the woods, passing several people who didn't seem to notice her. After a second, she had disappeared completely.

A moment later, the television shut itself off and the room was cast into darkness. Other than a train whistle far in the distance, the night was completely silent.

And it will stay that way—until the next time the children come out to play.



Cindy Zuniga



# Sarah "Otto" Marxhausen

## Crawling Back

"It's a terrible thing to lose one's child," they said at the funeral.

*But, she thought, it's far more terrible to get one back. How did I end up in a W.W. Jacobs story? I never wished on a mummified paw; I was never even given the chance to choose to be the foolish, shortsighted mother who damns her own son.*

They also talked about how awful it was, to lose both infant and husband. She doubted they knew how cruel they sounded, their wet eyes gleaming with the excitement of being so close to grief.

"If only your husband had survived, dear. You could have tried to have more children. Or if your baby boy had been spared - then you could have some part of him left behind."

She supposed they were trying to empathize, to imagine what she felt and therefore to be able to offer a shoulder, to be elected as the chosen sympathizer. She smiled at them helplessly and hated them dimly, for vocalizing her thoughts, for probing at the shameful secret that she was constantly weighing her losses. *Who would I rather have dead? My husband or my son?*

She couldn't stop it, this evaluation and wishes for what might have been. When she shut them all out after the funeral, it was because she was sure they could see the decision she had reached, they knew she would sacrifice maternal love for that of her husband.

She wouldn't have to work for a while; her husband's life insurance and, later, the settlement from the driver of the other car saw to that. So she could quite effectively wall herself up, a forcibly chaste nun within the tomb of her dead apartment. And because it was so easy, she made her isolation as complete as possible, guarding her sin from the eyes of others. *Let them think I'm overwhelmed. Don't let them know that I would kill my child for my lover.*

When he came back, she was sure he knew.

She was standing at the kitchen sink, washing

dishes - *no need to run the dishwasher when there's only ever one set of dirty plates* - when she felt, lightly as an imagined bug upon her skin, the touch of tiny fingers on her ankle. A jump, a gasp, a broken cup. Nothing there.

She did not feel it again for two days, when she was sitting in a chair, reading. They were on her calf this time, and she felt them with perfect clarity: the small, chilly fingers and palm, the tiny knife-sharp fingernails groping at her, a pat requesting attention. She bolted from the chair, hurling her book reflexively at seemingly empty space, hearing a *thud* she was afraid to identify.

After that, it was everywhere, twenty times a day or more. In her sleep, in the shower, the laundry room, even huddled in fright on the kitchen counter. Sometimes just fingertips, sometimes a whole hand or an arm, and once, the once that drove her finally from the apartment, a small cold face pressed - *nuzzled* - into her side.

She ran from her room, from her apartment, from the building. The world outside was foreign to her now, apart from the corner grocery. She shuddered at the thought of seeking refuge with her sympathizers, the mourners at the funeral. *What would they see in me now that I've run from my own, betrayed child?* She stayed out as long as she could, drinking coffee, window shopping - or pretending to, her eyes looking but not seeing the perfect plastic mannequins - and sitting at bus stops, always pretending she was waiting for the next one.

She'd been gone eighteen hours, and was sitting on a park bench, watching the city's maimed pigeons fight over imaginary crumbs, when she felt the cold pressure in her foot. Unmoving, she began to cry, letting the invisible infant put itself upright and cling to her leg. *Of course it took him so long, she thought. Just a baby, crawling all the way out here to find me. I wonder how far he had to come to find me the first time?* But no, she would not think about that. *What can I do, out here in public, with a dead baby clinging to my knee? Do I walk home and wait for him to catch up?*

With hands and arms as numb and waxy as candles, she picked him up. It was like holding cold clay, the kind of thick, gray children's modeling clay that leaves its chemical smell of wet earth on the hands. She put him in his familiar place, on her hip, where he settled against her, a clammy stone, and ceased his grasping.

*Why doesn't the world end? Why can I bear this? I should be screaming and tearing my hair, carted off to an asylum. Is this all that happens?*

Apparently, it was.

She walked him with his chilled weight - dead weight - pressed against her side. Her arm crooked out unnaturally from her side as if it were broken, apparently holding nothing. *He's so cold; my body hasn't warmed him at all. And he's not wearing any clothes. I owe him this, I wished him dead. I have to hold him.*

That was how it went, after that. All day she would hold him, switching arms when she grew tired. As long as she did so, he was still. At night, he would burrow up to her, a cold spot along her back or belly. *At least I can't smother him in my sleep.* Her life became a numb horror, but one she preferred to the endless surprise of chubby, clutching fingers.

He never cried, never ate, never soiled himself, never breathed, never grew warm. Whenever she ran her increasingly thinner fingers nervously across his cold face, his eyes and mouth were always shut, his nose free of mucous. *What kind of baby is he now? What kind of a ghost? Is he always asleep? Will he ever grow up? Is he angry at me? Is he punishing me?*

She thought nervously around the fringes of the largest question, nibbling at the edges. If this was really her baby, dragged back to her from death, were the mourners right? Did she have part of her husband back? Do ghosts have genetics? She wanted, in some way, to think so. Maybe she had part of her husband, a facsimile of him entombed in silent innocence.

She began not to mind so much, held him close, for her sake, for his sake, for all three of their sakes. *He's not evil; he's just a baby. He can't help it. I wish I could see who he looks most like now.* She stayed in, clutching her dead to her, occasionally venturing out to ignore the stares of those at the store who could not see the solid weight that threw off her balance and held her arm away from her body. *I have a horror on my hip, but it's my horror. At least he never tried to nurse; at least he's just a baby ghost. What can a baby ghost do except need?*



She could not love him anymore, but began to think of him as a treasure that must be guarded. He was innocence frozen, a cold cherub that needed her warmth. *Just a baby, just a baby.*

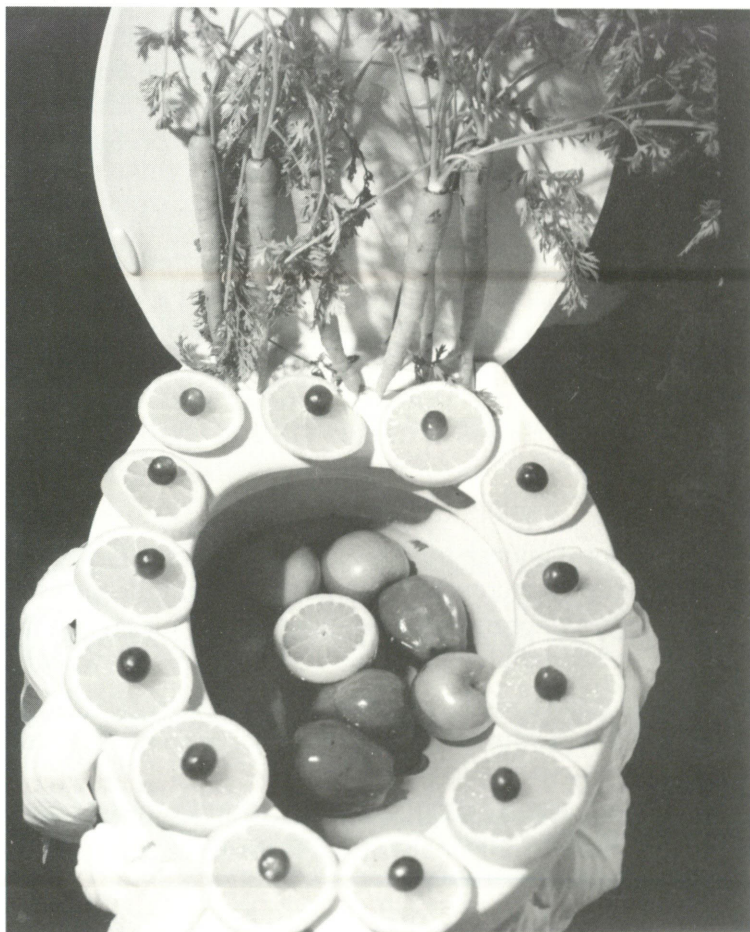
She stopped being able to separate her days, all blended together in a haze of cold skin and silent accusations which she knew she deserved. She had no idea how long it had been, the night he began to crawl up her back. She lay curled away from him; he lay pressed at the base of her spine. Then there was pain in her head - *what is that? What hurts?* - and she realized he was pulling her hair; he had grabbed bunches of her long hair in his chubby babyfists, and was pulling himself up towards her head. She lay in terrified wonder at this unprecedented event, unmindful of the pain and tugging, feeling him crawl, slowly, first up her spine, and then onto her shoulder blade, and then up her neck.

She felt him lying there on his belly, one cold hand on her jaw, one on her skull, and he spoke into her trembling ear words it must have taken him days, weeks, months to prepare, bidding his time, saving his energy:

"Hello, lover," he whispered.



Mike Kneeland



## Contributor's Notes

**L**iam J. Whitney is currently a sophomore at VU. He resides in Chicago, Illinois, and majors in Spanish. He can often be found jotting down weird ideas, a few of which eventually become stories.

**J**amie Brand is a junior who enjoys running, good coffee, fine conversation and anything spontaneous.

**K**endra Morgan is a senior from Peoria, Illinois double majoring in communications and art. She is a member of the Gamma Phi Beta sorority, Panhellenic Executive Board and various other organizations. she is also actively involved with American Cancer Society and advancing awareness in breast cancer research.

**T**onya McGue lives in LaPorte with her husband and three small children. She has a bachelor and a master's degree in public relations and journalism. She has held a variety of public relations and writing positions. She is the founding editor and publisher of the regional parenting magazine titled Family Life Magazine. This past summer, she began taking creative writing classes at IU and VU, and has high aspirations for pursuing a career in the creative writing field.

**J**essica Pleuss is a sophomore psychology/CC humanities double major (Chinese minor). Her poem Road Trip was written while on a crowded bus full of sleeping teens in Germany; her photograph Solace in the City was taken this summer in Shanghai. She enjoys experiencing the world and life.

**A**aron Miller is a junior chemistry major who recently found out that he not only has an irrepressible penchant for writing about monkeys, but also that the selection committee doesn't like the monkey things he writes. He assumes that that means THEY are monkeys.

**E**rin Creed is a junior english/spanish major from Seward Nebraska, a small town in the middle of nowhere. she would like to thank her parents for their love and support. she is currently busy making world history.

**R**odger Hoke is a sophomore majoring in philosophy and minoring in photography. He enjoys listening to music, dancing, being outdoors and doing things with friends. He hopes to someday travel the world and take amazing photographs of the people and places he sees.

**J**ohn Gresley III captured the selected work on a trip through Amsterdam. The man in the photo is Tom Southwood. The building is the hotel in which Gresley stayed, the Hotel Titus. The work speaks to Gresley's deeper love of underwater basket weaving. This is seen by the way the lines of the hotel weave together to create an effect that leaves the observer not quite sure of what is happening.

**L**ynne Albert is a freshman elementary education major, with possible minors in art, music, the humanities, and Japanese. When not selling her soul to Christ College, she loves doing completely random and crazy things with her friends, listening to and performing music, reading, and drawing. Her drawing was initially composed during an all-day Disney movie fest; thereupon she can legitimately cite "Hunchback of Notre Dame" as one of her sources of inspiration. The girl pictured is Christian rock singer Jennifer Knapp.

**D**irk van der Duim likes to hang out with Jesus and other friends, make photographs, find music, and juxtapose words. He takes joy in discovering the beauty and grace with which God blesses us every day, and he likes it even more to share these signs of God's presence with others. Most of all, he enjoys letting people know that God always loves them and wants them back, no matter what. Blessings and peace to you.

**L**iv Larson can't think of anything cool to say about herself.

**D**aniel Noto is a sophomore English and possibly Communications major from Elk Grove Village, Illinois. This is his first publishing on campus, and he is excited to no end about it. Danny would like to thank his highly literary parents, brothers and sister for instilling in him a love of literature, and would also like to thank Pete, Kelly and Shelly for letting him use them in a story.

# You can be a part of the Spring 2001 issue of the Lighter!

## Written Entries

due by Monday, February 12 at 8:00 p.m.

- Entries can be dropped off at the Lighter office in the Union.
- All entries must be neatly typed.
- Please include a cover sheet with your entries stating the title(s) of your entries, along with your name, address, and phone number.
- Your name must not appear on the entries.

## Artwork

due by Monday, February 19 at 8:00 p.m.

- The Lighter accepts all artwork, including, but not limited to: drawings, photography, and digital art.
- Size: artwork must be of scannable size (11 x 17).
- Color: artwork chosen for the front and back covers will be printed in color. All other work will be printed in black & white.
- Entries can be dropped off at the Lighter office in the Union.
- Please include a cover sheet with your work stating the title(s) of your pieces, along with your name, address, and phone number. If the artwork is untitled, please include a brief description of the work on the cover sheet and mark it as untitled.
- All artwork will be returned.

If you have any questions, or are interested in being on either selection committee, please call Christine Dale at 464-6078 or e-mail [christine.dale@valpo.edu](mailto:christine.dale@valpo.edu).











PIA  
"Corazón Encerrado"

Cindy Guiriga 2001